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Analyzing the future

Torch passes to a sprinter

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After more than seven years of rule by pale, frail and sickly men, the Soviet Union swiftly and smoothly handed power yesterday to a young, vigorous and confident leader—who promises to be just as hostile and hard-line as his elders.

At 54, Mikhail Gorbachev is the youngest leader to hold supreme power in the Soviet Union since the early days of the Stalin era. He is better educated and more widely traveled than most of his rivals, but he inherits a technologically backward and stagnant society that is traditionally fearful of the out-

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side world and resistant to change.

"Before he can lead the Soviet Union into the 21st century," said one U.S. analyst, "he'll have to lead it into the second half of the 20th."

"For the first time in a long time the Soviets have a leader who is adroit, skillful and intelligent," a U.S. government analyst said. "He knows how to sell the Soviet position, and he's going to make us have to work a little

harder." It appeared, she added, that the transfer of power was worked out in advance of the death of party leader Konstantin Chernenko.

ANOTHER intelligence analyst described Gorbachev, who made a big hit during a visit to Britain in December, as "personable but unyielding." He's of a different generation but he's from the same old training ground, the party and state bureaucracy. He's not going to be a liberal. Peace and friendship will not burst out all over."

Gorbachev's ascendancy marked the "generational change" for which Western analysts have been waiting since former President Leonid Brezhnev began to falter in the late 1970s. But when Brezhnev died at 75, in November 1982, his equally aged colleagues postponed the transfer to a younger generation by picking Yuri Andropov, 68. Then, when Andropov died in February 1984, they again postponed change by picking Chernenko, 72.

OVER THE LAST 13 months, however, with Chernenko obviously ill, Gorbachev has managed the day-to-day affairs of the ruling Communist Party Politburo. By displaying orthodoxy on ideological issues and diplomatic deftness during his trip to Britain, he apparently won the confidence of older

colleagues who were reluctant to entrust him with power upon the death of Andropov.

Gorbachev is the youngest of the 10 men currently serving on the Politburo, and with five of his colleagues over 70, he will have a strong hand in shaping the new set of Soviet rulers. Morris Rothenberg of the Advanced International Studies Institute in Washington pointed out that, with neither the KGB nor the armed forces currently represented on the Politburo, Gorbachev will have an unusual opportunity to build his own team.

ALTHOUGH it can take several years for a new party leader to consolidate his power by adding the post of president and/or prime minister, Gorbachev already has been chairing the Defense Council, according to reports from Moscow.

A dossier released by the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies showed that he has traveled to Britain, Italy, Portugal, Canada, France, West Germany and Belgium. Like Andropov, he is believed to favor some measure of Hungarian-style economic reform—especially in agriculture. But such reforms would be much more difficult to carry out in the vaster, less-fertile Soviet Union.

A SMALL BUT telling example of Gorbachev's self-confidence is that when he was suddenly recalled to Moscow from Scotland in December, he openly told his hosts that Defense Minister

Dmitry Ustinov had died. By contrast, fellow Politburo member Vladimir Shcherbitsky, recalled to Moscow from a trip to the U.S. Sunday, would not say that he had been summoned back because of the death of Chernenko.

A British diplomat said Gorbachev was a "breath of fresh air" during his brief tour of England and Scotland. "He didn't play the same gramophone record over and over again—as we usually hear from East European leaders—but on the issues, he was fairly hard-line," the diplomat said.

The transition from Chernenko to Gorbachev is not expected to have any impact on the arms control negotiations that have just resumed in Geneva, U.S. analysts said. Walter Laqueur of Georgetown said Gorbachev would focus first on domestic changes—the two most critical areas in the Soviet Union are agriculture and investment in new technology.